Mentha Morrison's Anti-Slavery Petition to President Roosevelt: Resisting Peonage in a Southern Jim Crow Company Town

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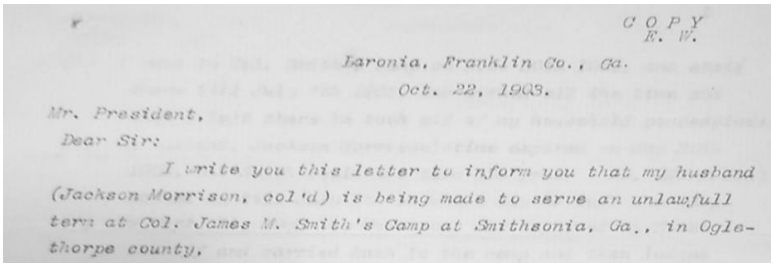
Introduction

In October 1903, Mentha Morrison, a Black woman in Lavonia, Georgia, wrote a letter to President Theodore Roosevelt and pleaded for his help to rescue her husband, "col'd [colored]" from slavery at the nearby Smithonia Plantation.[1] Mentha Morrison, at approximately 19 years old, found herself alone, raising a toddler, Sarah, and roughly eight months pregnant with her second child.[2] Her common-law husband, Jackson, was debt-bound to a plantation in Smithonia, Georgia, nearly ninety miles away from where she lived, and had been dragged away from her by the local constabulary because of alleged crimes perpetrated by him.[3] This statement – that her husband, Jackson, was trapped at Smithonia – was singularly powerful because slavery was abolished in 1865.[4] No slavery should exist, and yet Mentha specifically described Jackson's situation as "unlawfull [*sic*]" and "slave[-ery]" when she entreated the president to help her.



COPY
F. W.

Lavonia, Franklin Co., Ga.
Oct. 22, 1903.

Mr. President,
Dear Sir:

I write you this letter to inform you that my husband (Jackson Morrison, col'd) is being made to serve an unlawfull term at Col. James M. Smith's Camp at Smithsonia, Ga., in Oglethorpe county,

Figure 1. Opening portion of Mentha Morrison's letter to President Theodore Roosevelt describing the "unlawful term" her husband was serving in Smithonia. Image from "Letter from Mentha Morrison to the President," 1903, National Archives and Records Administration.

[1] *The Peonage Files of the US Department of Justice, 1901–1945*, ed. Pete Daniel (University Publications of America, 1989), https://pq-static-content.proquest.com/collateral/media2/documents/10620.pdf, 1:0643.
[2] FamilySearch.org, "United States Census, 1920: Mentha Morrison," January 7, 1920, accessed October 15, 2024, https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:MJDP-39G, line 4; Mentha's age is based upon the information in this Census, as well as the likelihood that the child she was caring for is her eldest daughter, listed on the form, Sarah.
[3] *Peonage Files,* 1:0643; Note also that while she referred to Jackson as being her husband, Mentha Morrison later claims she was not married until she turned 20. Georgia Law, however, allowed common law marriage between Black persons without the need for a marriage license, so her assertion of him being her husband would have been accepted as a legal fact.
[4] Mentha Morrison, "Letter from Mentha Morrison to the President," 1903, National Archives and Records Administration, https://catalog.archives.gov/id/121635315.

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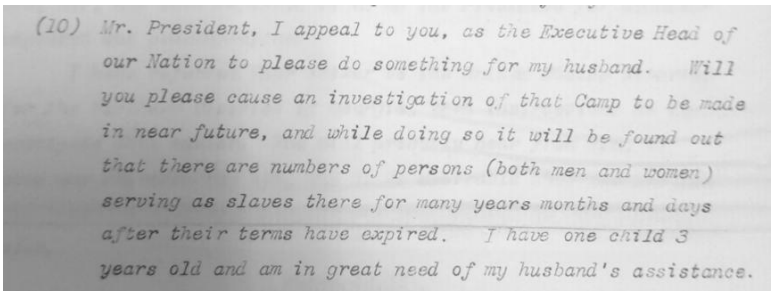

(10) Mr. President, I appeal to you, as the Executive Head of our Nation to please do something for my husband. Will you please cause an investigation of that Camp to be made in near future, and while doing so it will be found out that there are numbers of persons (both men and women) serving as slaves there for many years months and days after their terms have expired. I have one child 3 years old and am in great need of my husband's assistance.

Figure 2. Closing paragraph of Mentha Morrison's letter to President Theodore Roosevelt describing how individuals were being held as "slaves … for many years months and days [sic] after their terms have expired." Image from "Letter from Mentha Morrison to the President," 1903, National Archives and Records Administration.

Historians have long researched to more thoroughly discuss the effects of abolition and how it impacted free Black individuals in the aftermath. While the *Peonage Files* – a 1901-1945 collection of US federal investigative and legal records on peonage cases – helped to clarify that Jackson was entwined in debt slavery, or peonage, Mentha did not argue such nuance. As a peon for "Colonel" James Monroe Smith on his eponymous plantation, Smithonia, Jackson could not leave for fear of being beaten or worse, shot.[5] Jackson was indeed a slave in both the socioeconomic and sociopolitical senses, unable to leave of his own volition and made to work for long hours with no pay. Thus, the historical problem created is how peonage evolved and resulted in a zeitgeist that enabled the system to exist with exacting efficiency. Wherein a Black man, such as Jackson Morrison, was entrapped with little to no recourse that would enable him to complete his prescribed servitude or otherwise escape his plight. The Morrisons were powerless in the face of the Smithonia legal system, one that relied upon both the Black Codes and Jim Crow and was perfectly weaponized to subjugate the Black citizens of the surrounding environs. Smith's grasp upon the surrounding land was so thorough that Smith, a man whose wealth measured in the millions, was able to compel the local constabulary to travel seventy miles to arrest Jackson Morrison and return him to the plantation. A plantation that, at the height of its owner's reach, boasted a size of eighty thousand acres, or 125 square miles, a land area that is near in size to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, which occupies 134.36 square miles as of 2020.[6]

This article seeks to advance the historical record on Mentha and Jackson Morrison by drawing on a range of sources, including legal filings and testimonies, correspondence, newspaper articles, and biographies, to demonstrate how the Morrison family persisted despite their experiences at the Smithonia plantation. While La Toya Tanisha Francis and Patrick Rael's excellent research into Mentha Morrison examines the nature of Jackson's debt and its impact on Black women during the Jim Crow era, it does not explore the Morrison family's lives after the

[5] Colonel is not merely a sobriquet: the title was granted to him "after he became a farmer and began to make a success that he was given the title Colonel [by the Governor of Georgia]."; E. Merton Coulter, *James Monroe Smith: Georgia Planter, Before Death and After* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1961), https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uva.x000607031&seq=1, 189–90, 226–27.

[6] Smithonia Farm, "History of Smithonia Farm," 2019, accessed October 12, 2024, https://www.smithoniafarm.com/our-history; Acreage-to-square-miles calculation, https://www.calculateme.com/area/acres/to-square-miles/80000; US Census Bureau, "QuickFacts: Philadelphia city, Pennsylvania; Toledo city, Ohio," accessed October 12, 2024, https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/philadelphiacitypennsylvania,toledocityohio/PST045224.

1903 investigation as it was beyond the scope of their study.[7] Because Francis and Rael were primarily concerned with the larger discussion of gender inequity in peonage, their work does not delve into the expanse of James Monroe Smith's socioeconomic and sociopolitical power in Oglethorpe County, nor does it consider that the sheer size of his plantation and its environs was, as this article argues, a proto-company town. Thus, while Mentha's letter appeared in *The Peonage Files*, the research detailed here will provide insight into the Morrison family after their time at the Smith plantation, and accomplishing this task necessitates tracing the historical record of her husband and children alongside the wealth of James Monroe Smith and the empire he created using peonage as a central economic methodology.

The Systematic Cruelty of "Debt Slavery," or Peonage

The Passage of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Amendments

Though emancipation and the Fourteenth Amendment brought change for enslaved Black Americans, it was incomplete and ultimately a hollow promise for many former slaves and their kin. The intentions of some of the principal architects of the Thirteenth Amendment were based upon the idea that slavery was *morally* reprehensible. Concepts such as recognizing the humanity of Black Americans or interacting with them on the same socioeconomic and sociopolitical levels were anathema to their values, as evinced by James Ashley, the Congressman from Ohio, who fought for the manumission of slaves as early as 1861.[8] Though Ashley believed passionately that slavery was an evil institution, going so far as to violate the Fugitive Slave Act by helping runaway slaves escape while simultaneously nurturing an incandescent hatred of the "slave barons" of the South, he nevertheless considered White people to be superior to Black Americans, with the idea of miscegenation being outright "disgusting."[9] He had considered the argument that former slaves would be better off "going back to Africa," but still fought for former slaves who remained to be able to vote, join militias, sit on juries, and, most interestingly, attain political office.[10]

While the Thirteenth Amendment was eventually passed by Congress, this does not mean that the South was willing to acquiesce to the rules of Reconstruction. The punitive measures taken against the South for instigating the Civil War rankled, and acts like Special Field Order No. 15, issued by General William Tecumseh Sherman in 1865, were perceived as especially vindictive.[11] The Sherman Directive commandeered land in South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida (over 400 thousand acres) and disbursed it in forty-acre lots to former slaves.[12] Though this effort by Sherman was eventually rescinded, the indignation that arose over Black Americans having gained socioeconomic and sociopolitical agency led to Southern White efforts to exploit the loophole in the Thirteenth Amendment that allowed for slavery to exist "as a punishment for

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[7] La Toya Tanisha Francis and Patrick Rael, "Mentha Morrison: A Story of Debt Peonage in Jim Crow Georgia," *AAIHS: African American Intellectual History Society*, October 8, 2018, https://www.aaihs.org/mentha-morrison-a-story-of-debt-peonage-in-jim-crow-georgia/.
[8] Leonard L. Richards, *Who Freed the Slaves? The Fight Over the Thirteenth Amendment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 6.
[9] Richards, *Who Freed the Slaves*, 14.
[10] Richards, *Who Freed the Slaves*, 14.
[11] Michael Harriott, *Black AF History: The Un-Whitewashed Story of America* (New York: HarperCollins, 2023), 193.
[12] Harriott, *Black AF History*, 193.

crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted [of a crime]."[13] Since all that was required to enforce slavery was for a Black American to be duly convicted of a crime, the next step was establishing legislation that was subsequently enforced with malignant ruthlessness against Black and "mixed" Americans, ranging from lynching and domestic terrorism (via groups such as the Ku Klux Klan), and peonage, the system that entrapped the Morrisons.

The Black Codes and Jim Crow

For those who escaped the horror of lynching and intimidation, *de jure* criminality was imposed upon them in the guise of Black Codes and Jim Crow, a series of state and local ordinances that outlawed actions as mundane as loitering to transactional acts such as owning a gun, gambling, or selling liquor, as demonstrated through the infraction charged against Jackson Morrison. This was accomplished via *peonage*, a type of bondage that involves accruing a debt and contracting to pay it off within a given timeframe; however, the debtor was prohibited from leaving the premises.[14] These individuals were then referred to as *peons*. Peonage also included the leasing of convicts, wherein the funds for the debt were paid to the state, and the convict was then leased to the lessee for a given period. Both methods of peonage were utilized by James Monroe Smith on his plantation, which enabled him to work his voluminous land holdings without having to pay exorbitant labor costs.

Figure 3. Harvesting at Smithonia, Georgia, 1900. Image by David Lewis Earnest. Image from David Lewis Earnest, "Smithonia, Ga., Harvesting," 1900, Digital Library of Georgia, https://dlg.usg.edu/record/guan_earnest_e146.

[13] National Archives and Records Administration, "13th Amendment to the US Constitution: Abolition of Slavery (1865)," May 10, 2022, https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/13th-amendment.

[14] "Merriam-Webster Dictionary," s.v. "peonage," accessed October 12, 2024, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/peonage.

Aggressive enforcement of Jim Crow laws was accomplished through the machinations of local constabularies, prosecutors, and judges, all of whom conspired to ensure that Black individuals would be held accountable for whatever crime was alleged. This created a methodology that ensured there would be a pool of convicted Black individuals' labor for both the state and wealthy White Georgians to exploit. The ambiguity of the threshold of criminality meant that his criminal charge of carrying a gun was the only definitive statute that could be imposed against Jackson Morrison. This was based upon a weapons law passed in 1870, shortly after Black Legislators were expelled from the Georgia General Assembly on the fatuous claim that Black Americans had no right to vote or be elected to office.[15] It is not difficult to see the correlation between the two events, especially when you consider that nine former Black legislators were shot and killed after they returned fire against White aggressors when they attempted to enter the town of Camilla, Georgia, during a march to protest their rights.[16]

The Peonage Abolition Act

Though peonage was explicitly outlawed in 1867's Peonage Abolition Act for all US. States and Territories, most Southern states disregarded this. The Southern states accomplished this using civil contracts enacted to satisfy debts, established in exacting ways to ensure that a Black individual was trapped in debt bondage to a White landowner through the debtor's voluntary acquiescence to the debt's terms. This was often initiated within a courthouse when a wealthy White man would pay a civil debt imposed upon a Black individual for violating a Jim Crow law. Jackson encountered this when he was arrested for violating one of the Black Codes in Oglethorpe County, while others discovered they were held liable for a debt through their regular, voluntary labor for a White landowner. This often manifested in the form of payment required for basic needs (e.g., food and clothing) acquired from a plantation's commissary, a location the individual was compelled to use since they lived on-site and was unable to leave the premises to shop elsewhere. Thus, this type of debt became inescapable as part of working for an employer, who would naturally necessitate that the person satisfies their residual balance from utilizing the plantation's services upon completion of the employment contract, typically in the form of hard labor, and the agreed-upon timeframe was subsequently appended to their initial agreement.[17]

In the case of one man entrapped on another cotton plantation in Georgia, a man referred to as Marcus by Tamar Birckhead in their illuminating article *The New Peonage*, agreed to voluntarily work for one year for a man referred to as "the Captain" at $3.50/week and residing in a one-room cabin provided by the Captain.[18] Marcus chose to renew this arrangement for several years, even after the Captain died and he then worked for his son, "the Senator," and subsequently agreed to a ten-year contract.[19] By the time he satisfied his employment in the 1890s, the Senator claimed that he owed $165 for the various sundries he purchased from the

[15] GeorgiaCarry.org, "History of Georgia's Carry Laws," accessed October 12, 2024, https://www.georgiacarry.org/carry-laws/history-of-georgias-carry-laws/.
[16] GeorgiaCarry.org, "History of Carry Laws."
[17] Tamar R. Birckhead, "The New Peonage," *Washington and Lee Law Review* 72, no. 4 (September 1, 2015): 1595–1678, https://scholarlycommons.law.wlu.edu/wlulr/vol72/iss4/3/, 1598–1601.
[18] Birckhead, "The New Peonage," 1598.
[19] Birckhead, "The New Peonage," 1598.

plantation commissary, or approximately $5,897.43 in 2026 currency.[20] Thus, Marcus was required to work on the farm beyond his original expected date of departure to resolve the balance of $165, and this system reduced him to becoming a peon, "[placed] with the leased prisoners and forced to work from sunrise to sunset with little food or rest, under the constant threat of physical punishment."[21] The operation of the Senator shows that the South heavily utilized peonage as a cheap, easily replaceable labor source that relied upon the continued criminalization of Black Americans and/or the manufactured claims of debts that necessitated resolution through labor performed for a given time period. Of course, whether the debt was considered paid in full at the termination of said timeframe was the conceit of the Southern debt labor construct: demonstrating the continuing need to criminalize quotidian actions and/or create debt to possess the individual working on the property. Further, the entire operation of the Senator (as well as that of Smith) demonstrates how peonage served as a prototype for the later American company towns that rose in the decades following, which likewise compelled workers to use company-owned stores to acquire their various household needs with little to no recourse to shop elsewhere.

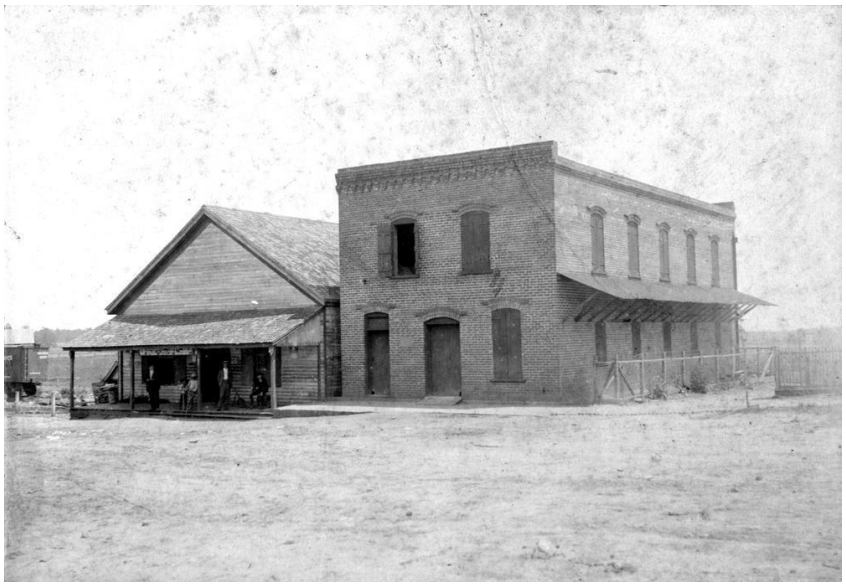

Figure 4. Smithonia commissary and adjacent building, 1900. Image by David Lewis Earnest. Image from David Lewis Earnest, "Smithonia, Commissary and Another Building," 1900, Digital Library of Georgia, https://dlg.usg.edu/record/guan_earnest_e171.

Another more insidious form of peonage contemporaneous with the system perpetrated by Smith was documented by journalist Douglas A. Blackmon in his seminal work *Slavery by Another Name*. Blackmon discusses how a Black man named Green Cottenham was arrested in 1908, convicted of the catchall Jim Crow crime of "vagrancy" by an Alabama judge, leased out to the mines of US Steel (that paid Shelby County $12/month per convict), and ordered to pay a

[20] Birckhead, "The New Peonage," 1599; "Inflation Rate Between 1890 and 2026," *In2013Dollars.com*, accessed October 12, 2024, https://www.in2013dollars.com/us/inflation/1890?amount=165. This estimate is based on converting $165 in 1890 to 2026 dollars.
[21] Birckhead, "The New Peonage," 1599.

fine, including court costs, of $38.40 ($1,357.57 in 2026 dollars).[22] When Cottenham was unable to do so, two months and twenty days was tacked on to his initial three months' "hard time," bringing the total to five months and twenty days of labor granted to US Steel.[23] By the time Cottenham's punishment ended, US Steel paid Shelby County approximately $69, equivalent to $2,439.39 in 2026 dollars.[24] Tragically, Cottenham would not survive his time in the mines, succumbing to syphilis and likely a concomitant infection of tuberculosis a mere two weeks before he was to be released.[25]

The Subtlety of Peonage

Thus, the difference between *peonage* and *convict leasing* is a nuanced one. Peonage involves establishing a payment arrangement for a debt: Jackson Morrison was assessed a fine, and the happenstance of a White landowner paying the court immediately upon Jackson's conviction meant that Morrison's criminal proceedings were resolved. He was a free man for the short period of time between the payment of the debt and his agreement to work for the landowner to resolve the debt he was told that he owed. Morrison established a civil contract outside of the court's purview, a private economic agreement. This is not the only method in which a person can be entrapped within a labor contract: one can be established without a crime being committed, sometimes through intimidation by a landowner demanding recompense for perceived damage to their property. This arrangement is likewise a civil matter and exists outside the legal framework of the courts.

Conversely, convict leasing occurs when an individual is unable to pay the debt or is not eligible for a monetary resolution with the court. These individuals are then sentenced to jail and become inmates of the judicial system; they are then eligible to be leased to parties as convicts to perform whatever tasks the lessee demands. Lessees can be individuals or corporate entities, with the funds paid to the county or state for the timeframe requested.

Jackson Morrison and James Monroe Smith

Census records show that Jackson, Mentha, and their six children were alive in 1920 and still resided in Georgia, with Jackson listing "farmer" as his profession.[26] It also indicates that Mentha and Jackson were married, though the date of their union is unclear. What is unlikely is that Jackson (or Mentha) was still associated with Smithonia; James Monroe Smith died in 1915, and his lands languished in probate until 1918-1919, when his holdings were finally assigned to

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[22] Douglas A. Blackmon, *Slavery by Another Name: The Re-Enslavement of Black Americans from the Civil War to World War II* (New York: Doubleday, 2008), 3; What is interesting to note is that the sentence does not make mathematical sense. US Steel paid $12/month, meaning the initial three months assessed to Cottenham would net Shelby County $36, leaving a balance remaining on Cottenham's fine of $2.40. The addition of two months and twenty days by the judge when Cottenham could not satisfy the fine was, therefore, excessive. Amount of the fine adjusted for inflation: "Inflation Rate Between 1908 and 2026," *In2013Dollars.com*, accessed October 12, 2024, https://www.in2013dollars.com/us/inflation/1908?amount=38.40.

[23] Blackmon, *Slavery by Another Name,* 3.

[24] "Inflation Rate Between 1908 and 2026," *In2013Dollars.com*, accessed October 12, 2024, https://www.in2013dollars.com/us/inflation/1908?amount=69.

[25] Blackmon, *Slavery by Another Name*, 322-323.

[26] "Farmer" is an ambiguous term in this zeitgeist, but unfortunately, no further records exist to clarify whether he was an independent farmer, a sharecropper, or if this was merely a euphemism for another peonage situation, such as he experienced nearly two decades prior; FamilySearch.org, "United States Census, 1920: Mentha Morrison," January 7, 1920, accessed October 15, 2024, https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:MJDP-39G.

an heir.[27] Since Smith never married nor fathered an heir, his named heir became his niece, Mrs. James F. Shehane.[28]

As for Smith, he amassed an enormous wealth predicated upon his prolific use of debt peons and leased convicts.[29] While Smith was an anomaly due to the sheer scale of his operation and how, as an independent entity, he constructed an entire town from the landholdings of his estate, he is no different than his peers with his abuse of the Jim Crow legal mechanisms to obtain workers. One of Smith's neighbors, William Eberhart, was charged with enforcing peonage in 1898, five years before Smith's plantation was ever a focus for the Department of Justice.[30] The Assistant US Attorney who acted upon Hazelton's letter later noted that, "[t]he complaints against Smith are exactly of the same character as the complaints against Eberhart […] investigation of [Eberhart et al.'s] practices were practically an investigation of their neighbor Smith's methods."[31]

Finally, the *Peonage Files'* records about Smithonia also reveal another fact: Mrs. Morrison's letter was not the first to detail the *de facto* slavery occurring at the Smithonia Plantation. A letter from one Mr. C.M. Hazelton was forwarded to Philander Chase Knox, the Attorney General, again at the behest of the President, a year prior.[32] Most notable about Hazelton's letter is that he was *White* and had no role other than as a third party traveling through the Smithonia area. His March 5, 1902, letter stated that there were "unfortunate negroes [*sic*] illegally held" and that he had even handled the whip that Smith used to beat the workers.[33] Thus, Hazelton's letter is an unfavorable testament that confirms the words written by Mentha: "(9) Col. Smith inflicts inhuman punishment on the person of his convicts, and whips them unmercifully."[34]

Mentha Morrison and Her Life Through 1903

Overview of Available Historical Records

In the year 1884, 1886, or possibly 1888, in Elerton, Georgia, Rosena and Berry birthed a baby girl whom they named Mentha.[35] Unfortunately, the records about Rosena and Berry are shrouded in uncertainty due to conflicting data from the past, as is the precise year of their daughter's birth. Whether Rosena and Berry were former [child] slaves or, more likely, among the first generation of Black Americans born post-emancipation is unclear. Even the accuracy of their surnames is imprecise; the death certificate issued upon Mentha's death in 1948 lists her parents as Rosena Allen and Berry Dyer.[36] Searches for either surname yielded no results in the

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[27] Coulter, *James Monroe Smith*,189–90, 226–27.
[28] Coulter, *James Monroe Smith,* 226-227.
[29] Coulter, *James Monroe Smith,* 35.
[30] It is necessary to emphasize that Eberhart et al. were merely *charged* with the crime of peonage; the final judgment against them stated that the peonage statute was not valid in Georgia, and hence, Eberhart et al. could not be held guilty of such a crime. See: *United States v Eberhart*, February 24, 1899.
[31] *Peonage Files*, 3098.
[32] *Peonage Files*, 3098.
[33] *Peonage Files*, 3098.
[34] "Letter from Mentha Morrison to the President," 2.
[35] FamilySearch.org, "Michigan Death Certificates, 1921–1952: Martha Morrison," September 15, 1948, accessed October 13, 2024, https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:KFW2-3M1. Mentha's name is misspelled on several documents, but other contemporary data about her family help to confirm that Martha is actually Mentha.
[36] FamilySearch.org, "Michigan Death Certificates, 1921–1952: Martha Morrison."

historical record. The closest confirmation that we can surmise is that there were a handful of different slave owners in Elerton, Georgia, circa 1860, who listed their name as "Dye," so it is possible that Berry's name was Dye instead of Dyer if he (or his parents) adopted the last name of their former owner. Beyond the information obtained from their daughter's death certificate, there were no other records of Rosena or Berry, and what we can glean about them is based upon clues given by Mentha in later years.

As for the Dyers' daughter, the confusion about Mentha's birth year stems from a lack of consistency in different documentation that recorded her life. While important, the precise year of her birth is a vague detail primarily due to census records showing a different age for Mentha from 1920 to 1930, and later, the date recorded on her death certificate in 1948.[37] Further, what we know about her life between her birth to Rosena and Berry and her appearance in the historical record in 1903 is minimal. What can be definitively stated is that at some point, Mentha Dye(r) met her husband, Jackson Morrison (her senior by approximately a decade), and later married him when she was twenty years old (either 1904, 1906, or 1908).[38] Thus, Mentha was not legally married to Jackson at the time of his first arrest in 1901, nor his subsequent detainment in 1903.[39] In addition, by 1903, Mentha was the mother of a two-year-old daughter, most likely named Sarah, based on the names and ages of her children in the 1920 census.[40]

Early Life of Jackson and Mentha Morrison

Jackson and Mentha appear to have had a humble existence and, like most poor Black families in Georgia, tried to eke out a living however they could. Their lives would have likely continued in obscurity had it not been for the petty criminality of Jackson, who was unfortunate enough to run afoul of Jim Crow laws in Carnesville, Georgia, in September 1901.[41] Historical records vary on which statute applied to this arrest, though it was likely a local law enacted under Jim Crow. What is known is that Jackson Morrison, at age twenty-nine, was accused of selling liquor on September 27th, 1901, and sentenced "to the [Chain] Gang for twelve months from Sept. 27th [*sic*] 1901, or pay a fine of $100" to be settled within five days.[42] It is with little recourse left to him that Jackson Morrison entered into a debt bondage contract that resulted in his wife composing her missive to President Theodore Roosevelt.

That Mentha and Jackson could not pay the $100 fine is not necessarily an indictment against their economic capability; $100 in 1901 is the equivalent of $3,826.49 in 2026 dollars, a significant figure for even individuals to pay in the modern era.[43] Further, the average income for 1901 in the United States was $438 annually, though the amount that a Black individual could earn is likely significantly less.[44] Considering this fact, it is of little surprise that Jackson and

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[37] FamilySearch.org, "United States Census, 1920: Mentha Morrison," January 7, 1920, accessed October 15, 2024, https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:MJDP-39G, line 4.

[38] Thomas McCampbell, "1930 United States Federal Census," Ancestry.com, April 14, 1930. It is important to note here that no matter when Mentha was born, she did not marry Jackson until *after* the incident that led to Smith obtaining Jackson for Labor in 1901.

[39] This is likely why Mentha herself was never held accountable for Jackson's "debt," a tactic also common during peonage that worked to ensnare entire families into bondage. While not married, it is possible that they existed in a common-law union, but this is not verifiable with extant records.

[40] FamilySearch.org, "United States Census, 1920: Mentha Morrison," line 6.

[41] *Peonage Files*, 1:0643.

[42] *Peonage Files*, 1:0643.

[43] "Inflation Rate Between 1890 and 2026," *In2013Dollars.com*.

[44] "Facts & Figures: Income and Prices, 1900–1999," *About the USA*, June 2003, https://usa.usembassy.de/etexts/his/e_prices1.htm.

Mentha's ability to pay this bill would have required them to be extraordinarily wealthy, and unfortunately, as a likely second or even third-generation free Black couple, that kind of money was not easily attainable. This is especially true with the State actively seeking to separate any accumulation of economic stability from him and his family through the preponderance of Jim Crow statutes that proliferated across Georgia.[45]

James Monroe Sminth: The Cotton King of Oglethorpe County

Curiously, the historical record for Colonel James M. Smith is minimal. A singular laudatory biography, written in 1961 by E. Merton Coulter, exists to explain how a man from modest means grew his holdings into a land area that spread into two counties (with myriad other plots across Georgia and beyond).[46] Smith evolved his plantation into a town that had a complete civic infrastructure, post office, utilities, a rail depot, and mercantile operations, a prodigious effort that aided in the longevity of his investments – Smithonia still exists, though Smith's lands have been sold to different parties in the years after his death. However, outside of *The Peonage Files* and Coulter's book, there is no critical analysis of Smith nor any effort to explore a man whose notable landholdings provided him with enormous wealth and significant political power.[47] Therefore, while E. Merton Coulter's hagiography of Smith is informative regarding the minutiae of Smith's plantation operations; any in-depth exploration of Smith's utilization of peonage, particularly his problematic custom of convict leasing, is lacking, provoking a need for a more comprehensive study of Smith, though that is outside of the immediate scope of this article.

James Monroe Smith was not born into the exceptional wealth he accumulated by his death in 1915. E. Merton Coulter referred to Smith's father, Zadock, as the "middle yeomanry class," as the man only had 300 acres to his name by 1860, as well as thirteen slaves (down from the eighteen he had in 1840).[48] Coulter noted that Zadock was a "plain old planter" whose estate was worth $10,500.00, or $398,874.76 in 2024 value.[49] While Coulter argues this is a modest endowment for James Smith to inherit, especially as the youngest child, he nevertheless had a robust education at the now-defunct Hiwassee College in eastern Tennessee before enlisting in the Confederate Army for a few years, though he apparently never saw battle.[50] After he was discharged, Smith began peddling various wares and acquiring land while also dabbling in politics. This included his being elected as a legislator representing Oglethorpe County, both for

[45] The term "State" here is meant to indicate the systemic nature of economic oppression that existed in the South at the time. The Black Codes and Jim Crow were structured in such a way that Black Americans could break the law simply by existing within public spaces, through an intricate, punitive web designed to elicit free labor for either the State or primarily white farmers needing workers for their plantations.

[46] Coulter, *James Monroe Smith,* 11, 13-15.

[47] It should be noted that James Monroe Smith served in the Georgia General Assembly and Senate as a [Southern] Democrat, a party that focused on states' rights to ensure white supremacy. Further, another gentleman with a nearly identical name was in political office concurrently with Colonel Smith; James Milton Smith, who became governor of Georgia in 1872. Coulter notes on page 94 of *James Monroe Smith: Georgia Planter, Before Death and After* that Smith obtained his Colonelcy sometime between 1870 and 1874. Since Colonel Smith was a "Democrat of the most unswerving type," it is unlikely that the two Republican governors of Georgia between 1868 and 1872 granted his Colonelcy. James Milton Smith was the first Democrat of Georgia following Reconstruction and was in office through 1877 – it is most likely that James Milton Smith is the Governor who gave James Monroe Smith the official title of Colonel.

[48] Coulter, *James Monroe Smith,* 3.

[49] Coulter, *James Monroe Smith,* 3.

[50] Coulter, *James Monroe Smith,* 5.

the House and Senate of the Georgia General Assembly; his attempt to become governor in 1906 never came to fruition.[51] Throughout his political ambitions, Smith continued to steadily build an empire that required the labor of many hands to erect the necessary outbuildings and tenant homes, process cotton and other products, ship, and otherwise manage his massive eponymous plantation.

From a Plantation to an Unincorporated Town

It is important to note that Smithonia was not necessarily unique in terms of its productivity, even in Georgia. Payne City hosted a cotton mill and, though it hired White workers for the best pay and job functions, it left "the hardest and most back-breaking work" for Black men and women.[52] Smithonia had both Black and White laborers; however, the overseer and management jobs were given to White men. Indeed, it was Smith's White bookkeeper who worked with the Oglethorpe County Sheriff to file criminal complaints against Black workers who left to re-acquire their labor through the convict leasing or peonage process.[53] Smithonia, for all its buildings and various services provided, was still a prison for many who developed Smith's land.

What sets Smithonia apart from operations such as those in Payne City is not just its practices in acquiring labor, but also the sheer scale of what Smithonia became as a privately-owned operation. At the height of Smith's power, he had over 99,500 acres of land and constructed service facilities that rivaled those of small-town governments.

Smithonia: The Prototypical Company Town

The First Company Town

The first company town in the United States was constructed in Lowell, Massachusetts in the nineteenth century and was emblematic of the idealized work-life town dream.[54] As a planned community, single, young women were recruited and made to live a "moral life" while they lived in boarding houses and worked at the mill from 5 am each day onward.[55] Lowell started a trend; the idea of a corporate community soon spread, with other industries, such as coal and steel, developing their own company towns to attract laborers for their factories or extraction operations. As a force for capitalism, these entities offered housing, at a minimum, for workers. Since the employees lived in housing supplied by the company, these men and women could not escape the influence of the company they worked for. Everything within the town, whether it be mercantile or entertainment, was furnished by the employer. If a person lost their job, then they also lost housing, schooling for their children, access to other town businesses, and most importantly, the community to which they belonged.

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[51] Coulter, *James Monroe Smith,* 94, 97, 143. Coulter never explicitly states that Coulter lost; however, other sources (namely, the list of Georgia's governors) prove that Smith lost his gubernatorial bid.
[52] "Payne 5," *Women & WWII Digital Exhibit*, accessed October 12, 2024, https://uscupstate.libguides.com/womenWWII/Payne5.
[53] *Peonage Files*, 1:0645.
[54] Aayush Singh, "The Rise and Fall of Company Towns," *Econ Focus*, third quarter 2023, 10–13, https://www.richmondfed.org/-/media/RichmondFedOrg/publications/research/econ_focus/2023/q3/economic_history.pdf, 10.
[55] Michele Lent Hirsch, "America's Company Towns, Then and Now," *Smithsonian Magazine*, September 4, 2015, https://www.smithsonianmag.com/travel/americas-company-towns-then-and-now-180956382/.

Company towns, such as Lowell, instantiate the North American corporate zeitgeist of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries insofar as creating a paternal existence for the workers: they would be provided with housing and access to necessary goods in exchange for laboring for the company. Company towns were popular due to the services that they provided, as well as consistent wages. However, they were not always utopian, with various problems arising in the decades of their existence.

The Case of Pullman Palace Car Company

Consider the case of the Pullman Palace Car Company town near Chicago, built in the 1880s in Pullman, Illinois, outside of Chicago.[56] Pullman was once a profitable luxury railway car manufacturing company that constructed lushly appointed carriages for the wealthy members of society. However, severe economic depression during the Panic of 1893 impacted the business, and it experienced a downturn in sales by the summer of 1894, forcing it to lay off a significant portion of its workforce and lower wages for those who remained. Since the company did not also lower the rent for the company houses, the newly-unionized workforce attempted to negotiate with management about this issue, who refused to discuss it.[57]

The result was the Pullman Strike, which effectively stopped railway traffic across the country.[58] One contemporary author in *Scientific American* derided the striking workers as "babes" who "must be provided with a clean house, not through the process of cleaning it with his own hands, but by philanthropic having people get [*sic*] up a subscription to hire some one [*sic*] to clean it for him." Despite this criticism, the workers, excluding their strike leaders, secured their reinstatement at their old wages, but only if they gave up membership in the American Railway Union.[59] Owners thus kept control of wages and the workers, even staving off a union that threatened their dominance.

Mining in West Virginia and Reliance Upon Corporate Mercantilism

Company towns were sometimes established far from extant metropolitan areas, typically with extraction industries. Civic services were considered part of the employment package and offered as an incentive for nomadic workers who traveled freely to find work, so that they would remain in the company's locale and offer their labor services to the company.[60] The proposition of housing (and potentially other benefits, such as postal operations or recreational areas) materialized as a paternalistic necessity not only to prevent workers from leaving, but also to 1) stave off strikes, and 2) keep workers under the complete dominion of the company.[61] This is evident in West Virginia, where company towns sprang up around the numerous coal mines that were often far from nearby towns, making the establishment of mercantile operations a

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[56] Jonathan Bassett, "The Pullman Strike of 1894," *OAH Magazine of History* 11, no. 2 (January 1997): 34, https://doi.org/10.1093/maghis/11.2.34.
[57] Bassett, "The Pullman Strike of 1894," 34.
[58] Bassett, "The Pullman Strike of 1894," 34-35.
[59] Bassett, "The Pullman Strike of 1894," 34.
[60] Mining and other companies often issued credit to miners via 'scrips,' and historian Price Fishback delves into this in great detail in Price V. Fishback, "Did Coal Miners 'Owe Their Souls to the Company Store?' Theory and Evidence from the Early 1900s," *The Journal of Economic History* 46, no. 4 (December 1986): 1011–29.
[61] Johan Sandström and Curt Persson, "Corporate Paternalism on the Rocks: A Historical Analysis of Power Relations in a Mining Town," *Management & Organizational History* 16, nos. 3–4 (2021): 183–203, https://doi.org/10.1080/17449359.2021.1977142, 186.

necessity.[62] Yet, the costs to establish new coal mine operations were high; operators needed to recoup costs and did so through charging higher rates in company stores while simultaneously suppressing miner wages.[63] This parallels the plight faced by Marcus in Georgia, described earlier in this article. While the miners bore the financial burden at the point of sale, Marcus instead found himself bound to his employer through debt allegedly incurred *after* he paid for his purchase, which created the conditions to entrap him in peonage.

Southern Practices Against Workers

In the South, workers on large plantations such as Smithonia were unable to stop work or otherwise protest for better working conditions since an overwhelming number of them were either leased convicts or peons held in thrall until their servitude concluded. Further, resistance to the whims of the plantation owner or the overseers could result in brutal punishment, such as lashes with a whip or being placed in a device called "The Bucking Machine."[64] Finally, the idea of unionizing is historically underrepresented in the South; even into the modern era, Southern workers have the lowest rate of union membership in the United States.[65] Indeed, "unionizing" was seen as a threat to owners of these businesses that aggressive actions could be taken against the workers, as is what occurred in the coal mines of West Virginia.[66]

These company towns were typically, though not always, established far from extant metropolitan areas. Town services were considered part of the employment package and offered as an incentive for "highly mobile" workers who traveled freely to find work so they would remain in a locale and offer their labor services to the company.[67] The proposition of housing (and potentially other services, such as postal or recreation) materialized as a paternalistic necessity not only to prevent workers from leaving, but also to 1) stave off strikes, and 2) keep workers under the complete dominion of the company.[68] This is evident in West Virginia, where company towns sprang up around the numerous coal mines, which were often far from nearby towns and thus the establishment of mercantile operations was borne of necessity.[69]

However, because the costs to establish new coal mine operations were high, and operators needed to recoup costs and did so through charging higher rates in company stores and while simultaneously suppressing miner wages.[70] Compounding issues further is the fact that miners were paid via company scrip, a private currency that was only redeemable at the company store, which on average, "charged 5 to 12 percent more […] than prices at independent stores in

[62] Social Welfare History Project, "Company Towns: 1880s to 1935," November 19, 2024, https://socialwelfare.library.vcu.edu/organizations/labor/company-towns-1890s-to-1935/.
[63] James Green, *The Devil Is Here in These Hills: West Virginia's Coal Miners and Their Battle for Freedom* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2015), 20.
[64] "The Bucking Machine" was a device that held prisoners "as a convenience" while they were beaten at the Atlanta city prison. For an image of the device, along with a newspaper article reporting on prison conditions, see: Digital Library of Georgia, "Atlanta Georgian and News (Atlanta, Ga.), December 17, 1909," *Georgia Historic Newspapers*, https://gahistoricnewspapers.galileo.usg.edu/lccn/sn89053728/1909-12-17/ed-1/seq-1/.
[65] Economic Policy Institute, "Operation Dixie Failed 78 Years Ago: Are Today's Southern Workers About to Change All That?" accessed October 12, 2024, https://www.epi.org/blog/operation-dixie-failed-78-years-ago-are-todays-southern-workers-about-to-change-all-that/.
[66] Hoyt N. Wheeler, "Mountaineer Mine Wars: An Analysis of the West Virginia Mine Wars of 1912–1913 and 1920–1921," *The Business History Review* 50, no. 1 (1976): 69–91, https://www.jstor.org/stable/3113575, 74–75.
[67] Price V. Fishback, "Did Coal Miners 'Owe Their Souls to the Company Store?' Theory and Evidence from the Early 1900s," *The Journal of Economic History* 46, no. 4 (December 1986): 1011–29.
[68] Sandström and Persson, "Corporate Paternalism on the Rocks," 186.
[69] Social Welfare History Project, "Company Towns: 1880s to 1935."
[70] Green, *The Devil Is Here in These Hills*, 20.

the nearest towns."[71] Housing for the miners was shoddy, lacking studs and built in inconvenient, if not dangerous, locations.[72] Eventually, miners in West Virginia opted to strike – violently – in a series of skirmishes known as the Coal Wars, and issued a series of demands ranging from the right to freely assemble to more fundamental issues, such as standardizing "2,000 lbs. as the ton of coal for which they were to be paid," and establishing scales at all mines.[73] Given that the "Coal Wars" were a series of strikes that occurred over a two-decade span, the efficacy of this first strike from 1912-1913 is up for debate. Yet, these workers were still able to stand up for their grievances in the face of a company that held complete control over their livelihoods.

The Boondoggle of Henry Ford

Possibly in response to the demands made by workers from both Pullman and the mines, which were seen as anathema, company towns were idealized as a solution for overseas production and reducing materials costs, where local laws would protect corporate interests at the expense of workers. Henry Ford, entrepreneur and founder of the Ford Motor Company, set about creating a company town in the Amazon for the purpose of harvesting rubber.[74] Though Ford was already established as a brand in Brazil, the cost of rubber was a concern to the company founder, and the overtures from Brazilian authorities to "turn the Amazon into a promised land" no doubt aided in his decision to construct a company town there.[75] Ford would send workers from Michigan to his plantation in the Amazon, many of whom perished to disease or other afflictions common to the jungle but not present in the United States.[76] Compounding issues for the town were rubber tree crop failures and machines that were not suited to the material harvested in the Amazon.[77]

Still, Fordlandia was built, and its factories operated from 1928 until 1930, when the first worker uprising occurred over the decision to "dock the cost of food […] automatically from bimonthly paychecks.[78] Though this timeframe is beyond the operations of Smithonia, Fordlandia followed the steps of Colonel Smith by acquiring land and developing a town to mollify the local population into working for Ford. The result of this idealism was the destruction of Fordlandia and the termination of most of the workforce. Ford still opted to rebuild the town, and it persisted until Ford's successor, his grandson Henry Ford II, turned the town over to the Brazilian government in 1945 for $244,200, a far cry from the $20 million invested in Fordlandia and its then value of $8 million.[79] Though the Brazilian workers lost their jobs in the process, the profligacy that was Fordlandia ended without another worker uprising.

The Contrast of the Working Class

Amidst the Northern United States and Brazilian town constructions, there is still one salient point: the fact that workers were able to strike or were largely free to leave if they found grievances with their employment. This distinguishing feature separated Northern and Brazilian

[71] Green, *The Devil is Here in These Hills*, 22.
[72] Green, *The Devil is Here in These Hills*, 23.
[73] Wheeler, "Mountaineer Mine Wars," 70.
[74] Greg Grandin, *Fordlandia: The Rise and Fall of Henry Ford's Forgotten Jungle City* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2009), 78–79.
[75] Grandin, *Fordlandia*, 78.
[76] Grandin, *Fordlandia*, 197-198.
[77] Grandin, *Fordlandia*, 199.
[78] Grandin, *Fordlandia*, 228.
[79] Grandin, *Fordlandia*, 350.

workers from their brethren in the American South. They were not just free to seek other employment, but also free to leave the area, return home, or otherwise live life without the constraints of bondage to the State, or, in many cases, to another human being. In the South, labor dynamics were dominated by the legal machinations of Jim Crow from post-emancipation to well into the Progressive Era. The Black Codes worked alongside Jim Crow to create a legal quagmire for free Black people: vagrancy, usually defined as not having a job, could result in fines and court fees or even their incarceration.[80]

From there, the legal process could end with those deemed vagrant being leased out as convicts to perform labor, with proceeds going to the county treasury. In other cases, a third party could pay their court fees in exchange for their labor under contract. This latter practice of debt peonage, though federally prohibited since 1867, persisted across the South well into the twentieth century.[81] The men and women who became either peons or leased convicts suffered similar fates: forced to labor for an individual, company, or plantation, sometimes seeing their contracts sold to other parties until the debt was fulfilled or the contractual agreement with the county was satisfied. This is, of course, the system that entrapped Jackson Morrison and resulted in his peonage and effective enslavement on the Smithonia plantation.

These factors significantly impacted the ability of Black workers to move about and secure employment in a manner that ensured compliance with local laws. Since different areas of the South had different Black Codes and other laws that impacted employability and even living conditions, governments were eager to profit from the criminalization of Black people, and employers were willing to pounce on the opportunity for free or greatly reduced labor costs. Whether established formally via contracts with a county or through direct wheeling and dealing at the local courthouse, Black people were sold into debt bondage, and cotton plantations, once emblematic of the antebellum South, again profited from the labor of Black bodies.

The plight of Northern workers when compared to the zeitgeist of the American South during that time reveals the comparatively more liberal treatment of workers in the North. The South, in contrast, relied heavily upon the dual systems of the Black Codes and Jim Crow to criminalize Black freepersons and use them as forced labor for the various businesses within the state. This is the case with Colonel James Monroe Smith, the owner of the sprawling plantation city of Smithonia, who was well known to utilize leased convicts and the machinations of peonage to supply labor for his numerous operations on his properties. These men and women were bound to Smith through contracts, either directly with Smith himself or indirectly via Oglethorpe County's judicial system.[82]

From Plantation to Company Town?

Smithonia Plantation, at its height, comprised land stretching across Oglethorpe and Madison counties, 37,000 and 13,000 acres, respectively.[83] Though E. Merton Coulter, Smith's lone biographer, insists that Smith "would never have got rich buying and selling land," the fact remains that at the time of his death in 1915, Smith had 16,500 acres to his name (or approximately 25.8 square miles of land) and gave name to the town that developed around his

[80] "Black Codes," *Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia*, 2024, https://jimcrowmuseum.ferris.edu/links/misclink/blackcode.htm.
[81] *Peonage Files*, 1:0643.
[82] N. Gordon Carper, "Slavery Revisited: Peonage in the South," *Phylon* 37, no. 1 (1976): 85–99, https://www.jstor.org/stable/274733, 86.
[83] Coulter, *James Monroe Smith*, 11.

eponymous plantation, incorporated in 1905.[84] So self-sufficient had the plantation become that it housed its own post office, mercantile buildings, processing facilities, and a railway depot that connected two other major rail lines that transected its lands in what could be argued was a prototype for a "company town."[85]

While Coulter praises Smith's business acumen, the most enlightening point concerns a casual detail in the long tract of financial dealings delineated in the text: though Smith produced everything from cotton to butter, butchered and processed livestock for sale, and produced various crops, he also "sold annually from $75,000 to $100,000 worth of supplies to his tenants, hired hands, neighboring farmers, and other customers."[86] Smith claimed to charge the "very lowest prices," but also admitted to earning profits "as high as 25 per cent [*sic*]."[87] To put this into context, this side business venture for Smith was worth between $2,782.067.65 and $3,709,423.53 in 2024 dollars, an amount that Coulter presents as though it was merely an afterthought for Smith to transact within his business empire, in essence, a "slush fund." When you contrast this fact alongside the struggle of the Morrisons to pay the $100 fine levied for Jackson's selling of liquor, it helps to illustrate how Smith was able to expend what was, to him, a small amount to acquire the labor services of Jackson and other convicted Black individuals. Quite simply, $100 was an insignificant sum to the business tycoon, a mere 0.13% to 0.1% of his "slush fund."[88] Indeed, a newswire from 1905 lists a portion of the numerous buildings constructed on the land:

- Electric lighting plant
- Steam blacksmith shop
- Corn, grist, cotton, and syrup mills
- Woodworking shop
- Buggy Repair Shop
- Complete system of waterworks
- Private Railroad
- Post Office
- Six Schools
- Five hundred houses.[89]

The question then becomes: what is the definition of a company town? Smithonia exists in records as a sizable plantation owned by Georgia's most prosperous bachelor.[90] Yet, based upon the sheer scope of the *civic* infrastructure in the news article, can Smithonia be called

[84] Note that this conflicts with the information provided by the Smithonia Farm "History" information available on their website, which claims that Smith was estimated to own 80,000 acres, a notably much larger quantity of land than that cited in Coulter, *James Monroe Smith*, 11, 52.
[85] Coulter, *James Monroe Smith*, 11.
[86] In 2024 dollars, these amounts translate into $2,782,067.65 and $3,709,423.53, respectively. See: "Inflation Rate Between 1901 and 2026," *In2013Dollars.com*.; Coulter, *James Monroe Smith*, 32.
[87] Coulter, *James Monroe Smith*, 32.
[88] Coulter, *James Monroe Smith*, 11.
[89] Library of Congress, "The Fargo Forum and Daily Republican (Fargo, N.D.), March 15, 1905," https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn85042224/1905-03-15/ed-1/?sp=2.
[90] Smith never married, and this is the description provided by Coulter, who is notably effusive in his writings about Smith and Smithonia. Smith was exceptionally wealthy for the time period, and quantifying his place in terms of relative wealth within Georgia is difficult due to the sheer number of records needed for such an analysis. See: Coulter, *James Monroe Smith*, 11.

simply the large working farm of a wealthy man?[91] Arguably, Smith provided significant infrastructure and utilities that qualify Smithonia as a prototypical company town. Indeed, Smithonia's annual output was enormous: "three thousand bales of cotton, twenty-five thousand bushels of corn, twelve thousand bushels of wheat, fifteen thousand bushels of oats, six thousand bushels of cow peas, six thousand bushels of sweet potatoes, ten thousand bushels of turnips, five hundred tons of hay and forage," and this only accounts for the products that come from the fields, not including output from the various processing facilities or livestock production.[92] It is not possible for an operation of this magnitude, involving the number of bodies on the plantation itself, without the infrastructure that Smith constructed in Smithonia.

Figure 5. Assumed to be Smithonia: possibly a livestock sale or demonstration, 1900. Image by David Lewis Earnest. Image from David Lewis Earnest, "Smithonia (?), Cattle & People," 1900, Digital Library of Georgia, https://dlg.usg.edu/record/guan_earnest_e181.

Whether harvesting agricultural products or refining them further in the mills, the presence of electrical lights, waterworks, a blacksmith shop for maintaining cast iron and steel tools, and a private railroad for distribution contributed greatly to Smithonia's success. For the townsfolk, having access to a myriad of services also meant that they would not need to travel to mail a letter or repair a carriage wheel. The sole difference between Smithsonia and later company towns would be that the workforce of Smithonia was primarily leased convicts and debt slaves, such as Jackson Morrison.

For this reason, I have argued that the vast wealth and institutional permanence created by James Smith also meant that Smithonia was not simply a plantation. It was a prototypical company town, sharing characteristics (or possibly inspiring) later corporate ventures such as Fordlandia, the infamous boondoggle established by Henry Ford in Brazil in 1928.[93] Though Henry Ford and his heirs eventually abandoned Fordlandia, Smithonia still exists as a town on the lands once owned by James Monroe Smith.

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[91] "Civic" in this context refers to constructions that provide a municipal service, such as a public utility.
[92] Library of Congress, "Fargo Forum and Daily Republican."
[93] *Company Towns in the Americas: Landscape, Power, and Working-Class Communities* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011), https://doi.org/10.1353/book11473, 94–95.

By the time Jackson Morrison's contract was purchased, Smith was at the apotheosis of his influence, a man who had served in the Georgia legislature, the Confederate Army, and held considerable socioeconomic and sociopolitical power within Oglethorpe and other nearby counties. His massive, self-sufficient plantation required many laborers, and Smith's solution mirrored many other plantation owners in the South: leasing convicts and ensnaring Black individuals into peonage through the payment of their civil debts or by buying out their contracts from other local wealthy White landowners. So prolific was Smith's use of convict labor that his plantation offers an apology at its present-day property, engraved on the very stones near the home Smith inhabited until his death: "bless the hands of those leased convicts who provided the torturous labor to build these magnificent barns *and* [*sic*] Smithonia."[94]

"Mr. President, Dear Sir:" A Humble Letter and Justice Denied[95]

The Results of the Department of Justice Investigation

The human consequences of Smith's proto-company town, built through debt peonage, come into sharp focus in the letter Mentha Morrison wrote to Theodore Roosevelt. Upon reflection, it is unclear whether she believed the president would respond to her request and intercede on her husband's behalf. In the same vein, we can only guess how Mentha felt when the Department of Justice's investigator arrived at her doorstep and asked her to elaborate further on the claims that she made in her missive. Maybe there was a glimmer of hope that the federal government would act where the local authorities did not. At the very least, she could have been simply grateful that someone listened to her plight while remaining skeptical that Colonel Smith would be held accountable for his abuses. Unfortunately, as with so many other details of Mentha's life, little information is provided in the investigator's report about Mentha herself. However, the US Attorney does contextualize the events surrounding the arrest of Jackson, clearly implicating the collaboration of multiple authorities to provide a steady supply of labor for the local businesses and plantations. After her interviews with the Department of Justice in 1903, Mentha all but disappears from the historical record.

The Department of Justice's investigation is enlightening due to the sheer amount of information that he unearths pertaining to the arrest and "sale" of Jackson. For the most part, the legal details that he finds provide little to no detail about the circumstances of Jackson's plight beyond those discussed by Mentha in her letter or interview. In each instance, Jackson is both accused and then convicted of a crime before being sentenced to hard labor *or* substantial fines and court costs. More concerning is the fact that the men who produced contracts for Jackson to sign knew their agreement was a *civil* matter since them paying the fine to the Court satisfied the *criminal* aspect of Jackson's conviction.[96] Even the Sheriff notated in his records that the local attorney who drew up the contracts for Paul Owens (the man who paid the fine so that Moses Jordan could have Jackson work at his brick yard) told Owens that, "when the fines were paid the law was satisfied, so far as the crimes were concerned, and if the negroes wanted to 'jump' the contracts they could do so and he would have *no criminal recourse against them*" (emphasis added).[97] Owen responded that "Jordan would 'bluff' them into sticking to their contracts," a

[94] Smithonia Farm, "History of Smithonia Farm."
[95] *Peonage Files*, 1:0643; Note that the original letter is in the National Archives but not yet digitized for public viewing.
[96] *Peonage Files*, 1:0643.
[97] *Peonage Files*, 1:0643.

very euphemistic turn of phrase that could imply all manner of abuses and threats to ensure that Jackson fulfilled the terms agreed upon.[98] Violence and intimidation are a common facet of peonage and likely kept Jackson bound to Smith well beyond the original terms of his negotiated contract with Moses Jordan.

However, the Department of Justice investigation was hampered by the fact that Jackson claimed he was not mistreated by Smith and that he was likewise guilty of the offenses for which he was accused. In spite of this, the attorney investigating the matter also felt that he was being misled, it being obvious that he believed Mentha's statements in her interviews and noted in his report that "I have an inward consciousness that something is radically wrong somewhere."[99] In agreement with Camp, his boss US Attorney E. A. Angiers, included in his report to the Attorney General that, "for years it has been known, or at least believed, that Col. James M. Smith of Smithsonia [*sic*], Oglethorpe County, Georgia, has been conducting an immense farm and become a multi-millionaire by the employment of converting free labor into convict labor, and it has been surmised that 'involuntary servitude' in one form or another has existed on his large landed estate."[100] Angiers further noted that Smith accomplished this "with an adroitly cloaked […] abuse of the criminal process," acknowledging that they understood the perversion of justice that existed in Oglethorpe and nearby counties.[101] Angiers remitted his concerns alongside the results of Camp's investigation and waited for further instruction from Washington.[102] Unfortunately, even though Angiers fervently pushed for Smith to be investigated, the plantation owner escaped legal ramifications and no records exist proving that Angiers' recommendations ever proceeded beyond their investigation. As this pertains to Mentha and Jackson, there were no details of the resolution to this matter, and, given that Jackson was under a convict lease, it is highly likely that he had to serve the remainder of his sentence, that being (theoretically) until April 1, 1904.

The Life of Jackson Morrison

Interestingly, tracing Jackson is much easier than following the historiographical record of Mentha. While Mentha disappeared from public records after the investigation records that detailed the investigation that her letter provoked, Jackson is consistently documented in census records. Jackson was born with the moniker John E. and was seven years old at the time of the 1880 census.[103] His parents were Gilbert and Charity Morrison, with the former being a farmer and the latter "keeping house."[104] He had four siblings, three sisters and two brothers, ranging in age from four to fourteen.[105] By the 1900 census, John E. had transitioned to Jackson E., and the now twenty-seven year old's profession was listed as a farmer.[106] A fascinating revelation appears in this record: in addition to gaining four more siblings, his elder sisters are shown to be

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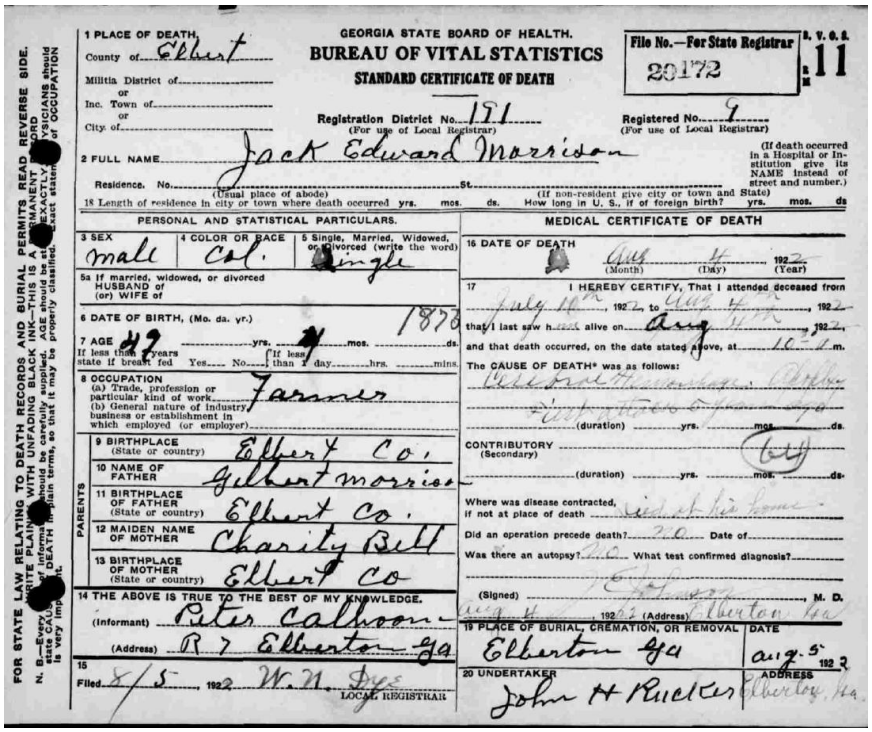
[98] *Peonage Files*, 1:0643.
[99] *Peonage Files*, 1:0643.
[100] *Peonage Files*, 1:0643.
[101] *Peonage Files*, 1:0643.
[102] *Peonage Files*, 1:0643.
[103] United States Bureau of the Census, *Tenth Census of the United States, 1880: Georgia* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1880), Internet Archive, July 14, 2010, https://archive.org/details/10thcensus0145unit/page/n354/mode/2up, 445, row 6.
[104] United States Bureau of the Census, *Tenth Census of the United States, 1880*, 445, rows 2–3.
[105] United States Bureau of the Census, *Tenth Census of the United States, 1880*, 445, rows 4–9.
[106] FamilySearch.org, "United States Census, 1900: Georgia, Elbert County," 1900, accessed February 17, 2026, https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:S3HT-D4P3-HKQ, line 4. It is unclear whether Jackson appeared in the 1890 census as it was mostly destroyed in a fire on January 10, 1921.

teachers with his younger siblings listed as "at-school."[107] This shows that his family had access to additional employment prospects and that they had access to formal schooling, indicative of more opportunities provided to individuals of color.

By the 1920 census, Jackson was shown as the head of household with Mentha as his spouse, residing in Wilborn, Franklin County, Georgia with their six children; Jackson was listed again as a farmer.[108] Tragically, it is the next time that Mentha reappears in the historical record, the 1930 census, which indicated that she was a widow; Jackson passed away in 1924 in Elbert County, Georgia.[109] By then, Jackson appeared to be using "Jack" as his name, and his cause of death was listed as a "cerebral hemorrhage due to apoplexy" with "a first attack five years ago [*sic*]" (Figure 6).[110]



GEORGIA STATE BOARD OF HEALTH.
BUREAU OF VITAL STATISTICS
STANDARD CERTIFICATE OF DEATH

File No.—For State Registrar 20172 S. V. O. S. R. M. 11

1 PLACE OF DEATH, County of Elbert
Militia District of
or
Inc. Town of
or
City of
Registration District No. 191 (For use of Local Registrar)
Registered No. 9 (For use of Local Registrar)

2 FULL NAME Jack Edward Morrison (If death occurred in a Hospital or Institution give its NAME instead of street and number.)
Residence. No. St. (Usual place of abode) (If non-resident give city or town and State)
18 Length of residence in city or town where death occurred yrs. mos. ds. How long in U. S., if of foreign birth? yrs. mos. ds

PERSONAL AND STATISTICAL PARTICULARS.
3 SEX male
4 COLOR OR RACE Col.
5 Single, Married, Widowed, or Divorced (write the word) Single
5a If married, widowed, or divorced HUSBAND of (or) WIFE of
6 DATE OF BIRTH, (Mo. da. yr.) 1873
7 AGE 49 yrs. 4 mos. ds.
If less than 2 years state if breast fed Yes No If less than 1 day hrs. mins.
8 OCCUPATION (a) Trade, profession or particular kind of work Farmer (b) General nature of industry, business or establishment in which employed (or employer)
PARENTS
9 BIRTHPLACE (State or country) Elbert Co.
10 NAME OF FATHER Gilbert Morrison
11 BIRTHPLACE OF FATHER (State or country) Elbert Co.
12 MAIDEN NAME OF MOTHER Charity Bell
13 BIRTHPLACE OF MOTHER (State or country) Elbert Co
14 THE ABOVE IS TRUE TO THE BEST OF MY KNOWLEDGE.
(Informant) Peter Calhoon
(Address) R 7 Elberton Ga
15 Filed 8/5 1922 W. N. Dye LOCAL REGISTRAR

MEDICAL CERTIFICATE OF DEATH
16 DATE OF DEATH Aug (Month) 4 (Day) 1922 (Year)
17 I HEREBY CERTIFY, That I attended deceased from July 10th 1922 to Aug 4th 1922
that I last saw him alive on Aug 1922
and that death occurred, on the date stated above, at 10 a.m.
The CAUSE OF DEATH* was as follows:
Cerebral Hemorrhage. Apoplexy
First attack five years ago
(duration) yrs. mos. ds.
CONTRIBUTORY (Secondary) (duration) yrs. mos. ds.
Where was disease contracted, if not at place of death died at his home
Did an operation precede death? no Date of
Was there an autopsy? no What test confirmed diagnosis?
(Signed) E Johnson M. D.
Aug 4 1922 (Address) Elberton Ga
19 PLACE OF BURIAL, CREMATION, OR REMOVAL Elberton Ga DATE Aug. 5 1922
20 UNDERTAKER John H Rucker ADDRESS Elberton, Ga

FOR STATE LAW RELATING TO DEATH RECORDS AND BURIAL PERMITS READ REVERSE SIDE. WRITE PLAINLY WITH UNFADING BLACK INK—THIS IS A PERMANENT RECORD
N. B.—Every [illegible] of information should be carefully supplied. AGE should be stated EXACTLY. PHYSICIANS should state CAUSE OF DEATH in plain terms, so that it may be properly classified. Exact statement of OCCUPATION is very important.

Figure 6. Death certificate for Jackson (John Edward) Morrison, August 2, 1922. Image from "Morrison, Jack Edward," Georgia Archives: University of Georgia Virtual Vault, August 4, 1922.

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[107] FamilySearch.org, "United States Census, 1900: Georgia, Elbert County," lines 3–18.
[108] J. B. Brown, "Georgia, Census 1920: Franklin County," January 7, 1910, *FamilySearch.org*, accessed February 17, 2026, https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:33S7-9R67-GBY, lines 3–10.
[109] *Ancestry.com*, "Mertha Morrison in the 1930 United States Federal Census," April 14, 1930, accessed October 14, 2024, https://www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/12929242:6224, line 5.
[110] "Morrison, Jack Edward," August 4, 1922, *Georgia Archives: University of Georgia Virtual Vault*, accessed February 16, 2026, https://vault.georgiaarchives.org/digital/collection/gadeaths/id/129287/rec/2. Apoplexy is more commonly known as a stroke or a sudden burst of extreme anger. It is not clear in the context here.

Mentha After the Death of Jackson

One of the most interesting facets concerning the 1930 census is that it showed Mentha moved to Detroit along with her daughter, Queenie (then twenty-two years old), and a cousin, Malinda Gary (Figure 7).[111]

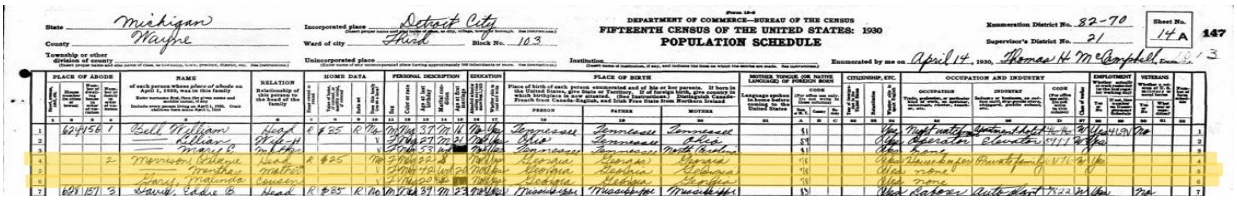
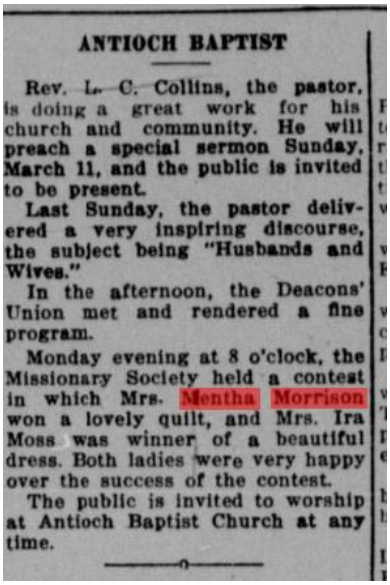


Figure 7. 1930 census record with entries for Mentha Morrison, Queenie Morrison, and Malinda Gary, Wayne County, Detroit, Michigan. Image from "Mertha Morrison," 1930 US Census, Ancestry.com.

Additional research revealed other quotidian aspects of Mentha's life; on March 5th, 1934, Mentha won a quilt from the Antioch Baptist Church Missionary Society, an event that garnered a news article in the local *Tribune-Independent* newspaper (Figure 8).[112]



ANTIOCH BAPTIST

Rev. L. C. Collins, the pastor, is doing a great work for his church and community. He will preach a special sermon Sunday, March 11, and the public is invited to be present.

Last Sunday, the pastor delivered a very inspiring discourse, the subject being "Husbands and Wives."

In the afternoon, the Deacons' Union met and rendered a fine program.

Monday evening at 8 o'clock, the Missionary Society held a contest in which Mrs. Mentha Morrison won a lovely quilt, and Mrs. Ira Moss was winner of a beautiful dress. Both ladies were very happy over the success of the contest.

The public is invited to worship at Antioch Baptist Church at any time.

Figure 8. News article from the Tribune-Independent, March 10, 1934, showing that Mrs. Mentha Morrison "won a lovely quilt" in a contest. Image from The Tribune Independent (Detroit, Mich.), March 10, 1934.

Unfortunately, in the same year, she experienced the tragic death of her daughter, Sarah Frederick, née Morrison, the young child who was so mistreated on Smith's plantation but survived, and who passed away in 1934 after marrying a gentleman with the surname of

[111] Ancestry.com, "Mertha Morrison in the 1930 United States Federal Census." Whether Malinda Gary was a cousin of Mentha or of Queenie is not immediately clear, nor is it explained if Malinda was from Mentha or Jackson's side of the family (in the event that Malinda is Queenie's, and not Mentha's, cousin).

[112] Midwest Newspaper Syndicate, "The Tribune Independent (Detroit, Mich.), March 10, 1934," *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*, https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn96076588/1934-03-10/ed-1/seq-3/.

Franklin.[113] Details about how Sarah died were missing from online records. By 1939, Mentha applied for a Social Security Number, with records indicating that one was assigned to her; curiously, it indicated that she was born in 1879, making her a few years older than any of the other records of her birth.[114]

In 1940, her son John Morrison, then thirty years old, had moved to Detroit and submitted his draft card for World War II, listing his mother, Mentha, as the person "who would always know his address."[115] Possibly the most fascinating information that was obtained for John is the fact that he worked for "Michlin Co. [*sic*];" however, the address listed for the company is residential today, so what this company was, or if it was tied to the more famous Michelin Tire company, remains unclear. Regardless, John claimed a stable employment that was radically different from that of his father. Likewise, another draft card for William Clarence Jones shows that he is Mentha's son-in-law and listed his address as the same as that of Mentha's: 566 Alfred [Street], Detroit, which is now a vacant lot.[116] Curiously, the Alfred Street neighborhood where Mentha lived was once a wealthy enclave that boasted several stately single homes as late as 1914, when the first "mansion" was converted into apartments.[117] By the time that "566 Alfred [Street]" was listed on the draft cards for her son and son-in-law, the formerly well-heeled district was completely comprised of apartments created from the remaining mansions on the block.

Two final records exist for Mentha: the 1940 census indicates that Mentha (entered as "Martha") lived with her two daughters, Roslee (or Roselee) Higginbothon (or possibly Higginbotham) and Queenie Jones, one son-in-law, William Clarence Jones, and her three grandchildren: Sarah (thirteen years old), Vandie (nine years old), and Melvin (five years old).[118] It appears that Vandie was the child of Roslee, while the parents of the other two children were unclear. Sarah had the surname Allen and Melvin was a Morrison.[119]

Sadly, Mentha passed away on September 15, 1948, far away from her native Georgia. No information was available as to the cause of death.[120] While Jackson, her late husband, likely had to serve the remainder of his sentence from the various charges he faced in 1903, as a couple they raised six children and persevered in the face of Jim Crow Georgia. At her passing, though, she had her children and grandchildren in her life, and she died living in her own apartment many miles away from the hardscrabble existence she endured in Georgia. The National

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[113] FamilySearch.org, "Sarah Frederick," April 18, 1934, https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:KF4X-ZX2.
[114] FamilySearch.org, "Social Security Number Identification Files: Mentha Morrison," July 1939, https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:6KQ7-JDZB.
[115] FamilySearch.org, "Michigan Draft Registrations: John Morrison," October 16, 1940, accessed February 17, 2026, https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:3Q9M-C3MH-W36N-Y.
[116] FamilySearch.org, "Michigan Draft Registrations: William Clarence Jones," October 16, 1940, accessed February 17, 2026, https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:3Q9M-C3M4-8HNT-S.
[117] Matt Harding, "Alfred St. in Brush Park: A Microcosm of Detroit's Early Decline," *Motor City Muckraker*, December 28, 2013, https://motorcitymuckraker.com/2013/12/28/15182/.
[118] FamilySearch.org, "United States Census, 1940: Martha Morrison," 1940, accessed February 17, 2026, https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:KHML-HLD.
[119] Melvin may be the son of John Morrison, given that he lived in Detroit; he might also have been born of one of her other children who moved north as well and then resided with her for reasons unknown. Also, given young Sarah's age, it is possible that her namesake is that of her late aunt, Sarah Morrison Frederick. See: FamilySearch.org, "United States Census, 1940: Martha Morrison."
[120] FamilySearch.org, "Michigan Death Certificates, 1921–1952: Martha Morrison."

Archives indicate that Mentha's missive, wherein she pleaded for assistance from President Theodore Roosevelt decades prior, was preserved for national posterity.[121]

James Monroe Smith

As for Colonel Smith, he died December 11, 1915, apocryphally shouting, "Lord have mercy on me," before he died in his bed.[122] Smith never married and had no children, and the fight for his estate, valued between two and seven million dollars ($64,406,336.63 or $225,422,178.22 in 2026 dollars) upon his death, entered into a battle as to who would claim what was left.[123] As Smithonia Plantation remains today, part of it is used as a rental hall for weddings and other gatherings, with other outbuildings either in a state of disrepair or somewhat refurbished to be part of bespoke picture arrangements for those who pay to traipse upon the grounds. Parts of the land were sold off after Smith's estate was granted to his niece, and those plots now have private owners. Interestingly, the singer Kenny Rogers once maintained a home on land that was previously part of the Smithonia Plantation: a 900 square-foot place called "Beaver Dam Farms" that was "personally designed by Kenny Rogers as an estate and getaway for family and friends."[124]

Colonel Smith largely escaped scrutiny of his deeds, though those who were aware of him openly acknowledged some of the abuses he perpetrated and from which he escaped legal penalty in 1903 after the investigation triggered by Mentha Morrison's letter. Possibly the true sign of his legacy is that a humble Black woman whom he mistreated on his land has a letter preserved in the National Archives, while the sole dedication to his memory is a biography written in 1961 that desperately tried to minimize his brutal legacy. The hagiography about Smith, composed by E. Merton Coulter, ultimately reinforced how a man who created a prototype for a company town escaped legal difficulties by virtue of his wealth, while those impacted by his avarice were made to persevere during the era of Jim Crow, Georgia. Smith may have a tomb erected to preserve his legacy; however, Mentha lives on through her children and grandchildren, far from the abuses she endured at his hands.

[121] *Peonage Files*, 1:0643.
[122] Coulter, *James Monroe Smith*, 190.
[123] Coulter, *James Monroe Smith*; 193. The 2026 values for his estate were obtained from "Inflation Rate Between 1915 and 2026," In2013Dollars.com.
[124] "Beaver Dam Farms," *Beaver Dam Farms*, 2015, https://www.beaverdamsale.com/.